

News comes to us from all over the world so fast, that it must vacate the newspapers and broadcasts just as fast to make way for the next thing. So perhaps the name of Gayle Williams will not be in the forefront of your minds right now, although only six days ago she was the lead story of the news. She was a 34 year old British/South African charity worker in Afghanistan, where she served a Christian organisation helping handicapped Afghans. She was shot dead while walking to work on Monday morning. And the reason? A spokesman for her assassins explained, "This woman came to Afghanistan to teach Christianity to the people of Afghanistan. Our leaders issued a decree to kill this woman." (Zabiullah Mujahid in a statement to The Associated Press)

Jesus said, "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force." Did anyone really believe that they could seize the kingdom of God by force of arms? Surely anyone who believed that they could unseat the reign of the Gospel by firing a bullet into a defenceless woman had no idea of what they were trying to take.

The prophets suffered violence. The last of them, John the Baptist was beheaded. John came to proclaim the Kingdom of heaven, but the violent sought to usurp it by force. Apparently Herodias sought it so much, that even when she could have demanded anything up to half of a whole earthly kingdom, she prized rather the head of the Baptist, who proclaimed the Kingdom of God. She can have had no inkling what she was trying to control, if she imagined that such an act of violence would contain it.

John the Baptist was not some incidental inconvenience to the ambitions of Herodias. He was, if you are prepared to accept it, nothing less than Elijah who is to come. This puts it into perspective a little bit. The older testament in our Bibles closes like an episode of a drama ...to be continued, with the promise, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.

And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction." So the return of the ancient prophet was to be the sign that God was acting to avert the destruction of his people – the great Gospel. And then, dramatically, the next verse in our Bibles begins the New Testament, after just a few short centuries. And there in Matthew's Gospel we find John the Baptist at the River Jordan, dressed like Elijah in a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, proclaiming the Kingdom of God is at hand. This is it, the herald of the Kingdom, because he is the herald of the King. Did Herodias think that such an undertaking of God - prepared from long before Elijah in the Garden of humanity's rebellion – did she think *that* could be wrested away by such a futile act of violence?

We, of course, live in a more civilized age. Such crude violence offends our generation, and rightly so. But force exerts itself in other ways. Our generation understands the power of money. We were probably more bewildered than alarmed by the news in these last days that a group of atheists are planning to buy advertisements on the not inconsiderable sides of bendy buses, to announce "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life." We are bewildered, not just because we who hold that there more than probably *is* a God find it helps us a great deal to stop worrying and we enjoy our lives very much, thank you, but also because it is not obvious what the motive of such a campaign would be. There must be one, since the adverts cost nearly £100 per bus, but since 31000 was raised for the cause in a day, we will probably see quite a lot of the message, at least if we visit London. But it will not ambush the kingdom of heaven. The force of money is powerless here, if nowhere else.

Indeed, trusting in the power of wealth is not a new phenomenon. In the earliest days of Christianity, the Acts of the Apostles tells us of a magician in Samaria called Simon, who had been amazing people with his tricks, until he saw something more impressive. Acts explains, "Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, "Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God."

"The kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force", not the sword this time, but cash. Peter said it all: "You thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!" Of course, a gift cannot be purchased. For then it would not be a gift, and herein lies the truth about the Kingdom of God – It is the kingdom of grace, and can only be received as a gift. The one thing that will repel it is the attempt to earn it,

buy it or steal it. It is like trying to buy love – the moment anything is offered in exchange for love it ceases to be love.

Again, we may be more at home with the force of argument. In a land of free speech it is our right to try to persuade through reasoned words. But no one is ever argued into the Kingdom of God, ask St. Paul, who left King Agrippa complaining “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?” But people are not persuaded, despite numerous tracts, blogs and even sermons putting the case. The problem is that the Kingdom of God is not an opinion, however well founded, just as it is not a commodity to be bought, or a prize to be fought for with arms. And neither can it be taken away from anyone by argument.

St. Paul once had occasion to warn the Christians just what they are fighting against: “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood,” he said, “but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” Christians needed and still need to be aware that their battle is not to be won by the devices of flesh and blood, like bullets or beheadings, silver or gold, logical premises and propositions. But those who would seize our Lord’s kingdom also need to be aware that it is not of this world. And if you think it is, whatever you gain will be of this world, but it will not be the kingdom of heaven.

Today we commemorate the Reformation, and our minds take their annual excursion to the 16th Century. It is hard to imagine a time in the world’s or the church’s history where the truth of Jesus’ teaching was played out more graphically. People believed that they could seize the kingdom by force. But the Gospel emerged as strangely immune to the threats that raged against it. That is not to say that people were immune. Some, like John the Baptist, were beheaded, and some were burned. Some were excommunicated or declared outlaw. But the grasp of violence returned an empty fist if it was clutching at the Kingdom of Grace in the Gospel. The power of money, of course was not far from the surface.

We know that the events we commemorate on this day were triggered in part by the peddling of the indulgence, which simply tried to replace the free gift of God, forgiveness in Jesus Christ, and market an alternative, an exemption from all the temporal punishment of people’s sins, in what was called an indulgence. But that was only paper and it was exchanged for mere money and nothing changed with regard to the Kingdom of heaven.

And the period is littered with the force of argument – diets and disputes, tracts and treatises, councils and colloquies, all of which make work for the student of the Reformation to the present day. And, while all this was going on, the Gospel slipped from their grip, and the Kingdom went about growing as if oblivious to all that commotion.

“From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence,” said Jesus, “and the violent snatch it by force.” They are left clenching a mirage, because any of us who thinks the Kingdom can be found in this way has simply failed to understand what it is.

Since John the Baptist is introduced to us as the Elijah who is to come, we are reminded of Elijah himself seeing the kingdom of heaven being assailed. He complained to God, “I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.” And God told him, “Go out and stand on the mount before the LORD.” “And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper.” And there God spoke to Elijah. Not in the strong wind, neither in the force of arms; not in the earthquake, neither in the great power of wealth; not in the fire, neither in the vigor of argument; but in the still small voice, in the Gospel God himself spoke.

So how is the Kingdom to be received and to be entered? The Baptist who announced its coming did so with a message of simplicity: repent.

Do you see that this is the very opposite of grasping the kingdom by force. Repentance is a denial of any power we call our own. Far from asserting our strength, it acknowledges our helplessness. As for our worthiness, repentance denies it. And what, then, must we do? Only trust God and our Saviour Jesus Christ. Welcome to the Kingdom of God.

Amen.